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# *Manuscript Studies*

## **An Introduction to Persian Seals: Special Reference to Devotional Seals from an Eighteenth-Century Manuscript**

*Amir H. Zekrgoo*<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*This article provides an overview of formation and transformation of Persian seals in the course of about 6000 years, with a focus on a group of seals, devotional in nature, from an interesting eighteenth-century Persian manuscript preserved at the Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' (SMNA) Library, ISTAC-IIUM. The paper is divided in four main sections. First, "Pre-Islamic Persian Seals," which provides a concise account of the variety of ancient seals from Iran's historical sites. Second, "The First Seal of the Islamic World," which is an introduction to the origination of using seals in the Islamic world that goes back to the early years of Islam, when Prophet Muhammad used his personal seal to authenticate the official letters that were prepared on his behalf. Third, "Persian Seals of the Islamic Era," which is an overview of the seals in Persian language that became widespread after the advent of Islam. And fourth, "Collection of Seals in Nami's Manuscript," which is a detailed assessment of forty-three seal impressions from seven seals in a single manuscript. The inscriptions on the seals are devotional in nature, which is a departure from the traditional function of manuscript seals.*

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**Keywords:** *Leylī va Majnōn, Khosrow va Shīrīn, Nāmī Isfahānī, Ali, Persian seals, Qajar manuscript.*

## Introduction

Seals have been a remarkable feature of Persian tradition during the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. During the Islamic era, seals became an essential feature of various documents, contracts, official letters and royal decrees, as well as an important component of Islamic manuscripts. The owners of manuscripts often left their seal impressions on the books they owned, usually with addition of some writings that provided valuable information. This article provides an overview of the long history of Persian seals, but with a focused discussion on devotional seals drawn from an eighteenth-century manuscript kept at Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas' (SMNA) Library, ISTAC. It first provides a concise account of pre-Islamic Persian seals in which are included some 16 images as representatives of seals that were made of various materials, and decorated with a wide range of designs: geometric, floral, animal and human.

This is followed by a discussion of the early seals of the Islamic world originating from the Prophet Muhammad's tradition when he used his personal seal to authenticate the official letters that were prepared on his behalf. The article then proceeds to provide an overview of Persian seals in the subsequent centuries of the Islamic era. For many centuries, Persian was the literary and official language of a large region stretching from China to the Balkans, and from Siberia to the Indian subcontinent. As such, Persian seals are abundant. In this section I have included two interesting Persian seals by foreign officials who were posted in countries where Persian was the official language.

The article's last treatment, which is its focus, is on the collection of seals in Nami's Manuscript." It is a detailed assessment of forty-three seal impressions from seven seals in a single manuscript – a rare instance in itself! The inscriptions on the seals are devotional in nature, which is a departure from the traditional function of manuscript seals. Symbolic use of visual element is also

remarkable. Together they put the collection of seals on a socially and culturally distinct ground. As seal impressions are often faded or imperfect, reading the inscriptions and seeing the details of decoration are not always easy. To provide a clearer/sharper visual presentation of the seals, I have included two images for each category; an image of the seal as it appears on the manuscript page, and a sketch that I drew.<sup>3</sup>

### **Pre-Islamic Persian Seals**

The wide variety of seals that have so far been excavated from Iranian sites go as far back as the fourth millennium BCE. The earliest seals were made of stone, baked clay and gypsum.<sup>4</sup> Seals found from sites such as *Sialk*, *Tappeh Hesar* and *Tall-e Bakun* are round in shape and have simple geometric patterns carved on them. (Fig. 1) Use of metal in making seals allowed more creativity. The shapes and designs of seals found in Susa and Shahr-e Sukhteh (the Burnt City), for instance, display a higher degree of craftsmanship and artistic creativity and sophistication. Metal seals from these sites have a variety of shapes – from as simple as cross and star, to symmetrical floral shapes, all the way to organic seals shaped like birds, snakes and mythological creatures. (Fig. 2). Cylindrical seals from Susa, with human and animal motifs have been dated to the third millennium BCE.<sup>5</sup> The second millennium BCE excavations from Choghazanbil ziggurat brought to light seals that depict scenes from some sort of religious ceremonies or rituals related to harvest. The formality of the figures and the arrangement of the pictorial elements on them have similarities to stone reliefs of Persepolis. (Fig.3)

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<sup>3</sup> All the images and line drawings of seals from Nami Isfahani's manuscript in this article are by Amir H. Zekrgoo.

<sup>4</sup> Mohammad Javad Jeddi, *Encyclopedia of Seals and Engravings in Iran* (Tehran: Iran Academy of Art, MATN Publishing, 1392Sh/2012), 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> For an elaborated account, see Malekzadeh Bayani, *History of Seals in Iran: 4<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium BC* (Tehran: Yazdan Publishers, 1984).

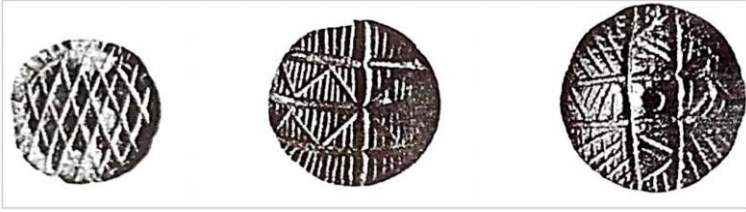


Fig. 1: Seals carved on stone, with geometric patterns, excavated from Tall-e Bakun, Persepolis, c. 4th millennium BCE.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 2: Selected Bronze seals with sophisticated geometric, floral and animal designs. Susa, c. 4th millennium BCE.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Images are from M. J. Jeddi's *Encyclopedia of Seals and Engravings in Iran*, 38-39.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 41-42.

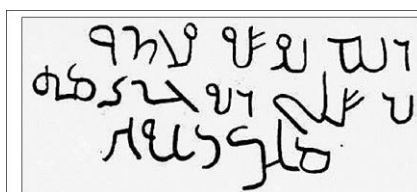




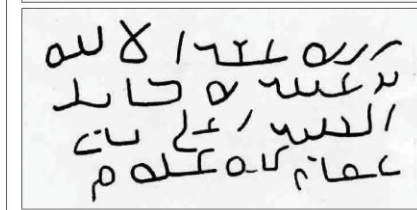
*Fig. 3: Impressions from two cylindrical seals unearthed in Choqazanbil prayer chamber, c. 2nd millennium BCE.*<sup>8</sup>

### The First Seal of the Islamic World

Perhaps the most fundamental cultural impact of Islam on the nations that embraced and converted to it, was the introduction of a new script. A handful of pre-Islamic tombstones inscriptions have survived from a three-hundred-year span (third to sixth-century BCE) before the advent of Islam. A primitive crudeness is observed at both. Moreover, there is hardly a trace of change that would indicate development – from both the structure of the letters or the aesthetic outlook. (Fig. 4 & 5). This suggests that writing was not a major component of the pre-Islamic societies of the Arabian Peninsula.



*Fig. 4 (top)  
Pre-Islamic Tombstone  
Inscription, 3rd cent. CE.  
Umm al-Jimal*



*Fig. 5 (bottom)  
Pre-Islamic Tombstone  
Inscription, 6th cent. CE.  
Umm al-Jimal*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 46-48.

Fig. 4 (top) and 5 (bottom) show two Nabataean inscriptions from tombstones found in Umm al-Jimal, three centuries apart. There is hardly any noticeable change in the primitive outlook of the scripts that are three centuries apart.<sup>9</sup>

After the advent of Islam and the revelation of the Qur'an, the need for reading and writing increased and, with that, gradually a primitive form of writing appeared. This script exhibited the crudeness of Nabataean inscriptions of Umm al-Jimal with some recognizable Arabic words. Prophet Muhammad's letter to Mundhar ibn Sau'i is a good example. One can feel that even the Prophet's letter lacks the qualities that are expected from a well-developed, structurally sound, and aesthetically appealing script (compare figures 4, 5 and 6). At the bottom of the Prophet's letter, a seal appears that reads, in an unpolished Arabic writing, 'Muhammad, the Messenger of God'. This seal impression is perhaps the oldest, and the most remarkable seal in Islamic history. The seal has a formalistic significance because it may be regarded as the prototype for other seals that were produced in the Islamic world up to the contemporary times. (Fig.6).

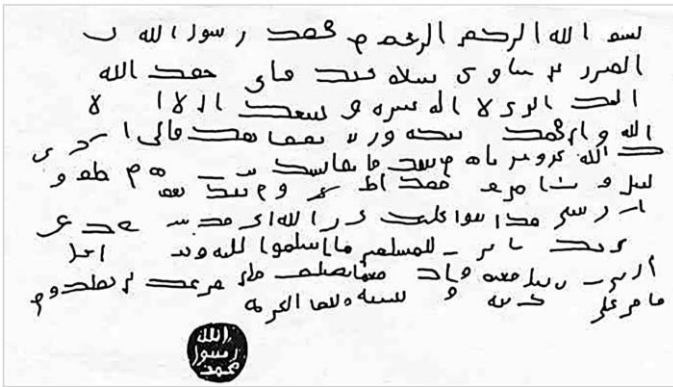


Fig.6: Letter of the Prophet to Mundhar ibn Sau'i, conqueror of al-Hasa (or al-Ahsa), with a seal that reads; 'Muhammad, the Messenger of God'.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Images are taken from Yasin Hamid Safadi's *Islamic Calligraphy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 6.

<sup>10</sup> The original letter was once in the collection of the Museum of Iraqi Antiquities,

A few stories and theories have been formed about the history and whereabouts of the Prophet's ring-seal. It is said that it was inherited by Abu Bakr, Umar, and finally Uthman who lost it in a well in Medina. The seal is said to have been found in 1534 when the Ottoman Emperor captured Baghdad and brought the seal to Istanbul.<sup>11</sup> The said seal is now preserved in the Topkapi Museum. Another account, that sounds more probable, refers to a replica of the seal that was made after its disappearance – an incident that was seen as a sign of ill-fortune.<sup>12</sup>

Another source of Prophet's seal(s) identification, is the study of documents bearing seal impressions. This approach sounds more appealing, at least from the research methodology standpoint. Ottoman manuscript copies of Prophet Muhammad's letters have been among the sources for such discoveries. Though the images of the seals produced based on such letters became popular, some scholars have questioned the authenticity of the letters to the extent of calling them 'forgeries', 'fakes on paleographical grounds', and "devoid of any historical value."<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the question of authenticity of the seals in discussion, it cannot be denied that seals have functioned as a symbol of authority right from the beginning of the history of Islam.

### **Persian Seals of the Islamic Era**

Change of script had a direct impact on the seals. Adaptation of Arabic script – which the Persian calligraphers had a pioneering role

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Baghdad. I am unaware if this letter is still preserved there, because the Museum was looted during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Luckily, images of the letter have been preserved in the printed media. I got this image from Habibullah Fazaeli, *Atalas-e Khatt* (Tehran, 1362 Sh./, 1980), 112.

<sup>11</sup> See Rachel Milstein, "Futuh-I Haramayn: Sixteenth-century illustrations of the Hajj route" in David J. Wasserstein and Ami Ayalon, eds., *Mamluks and Ottomans: Studies in Honour of Michael Winter* (Routledge, 2013), 191.

<sup>12</sup> See George F. Kunz, *Rings for the Finger, from the Earliest Known Times to the Present* (Philadelphia and London, 1917), 141, retrieved from [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b361035&view=1up&seq=213](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b361035&view=1up&seq=213)

<sup>13</sup> The letter which was initially considered to be the Prophet's original letter to Al-Mukawkis (found in 1850), for instance, has been recognized as fake. See K. Öhrnberg, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Second Edition, 2007, under "Mukawis"

in its design and standardisation<sup>14</sup> – changed the face of seals produced in the Persianate societies, which was already a huge territory within the Islamic world. Seals were engraved on metal plates or precious stones. People made them into rings (seal-rings) that functioned as identity documents in many Muslim societies. “Almost every person who can afford it has a seal-ring, even though he be a servant.”<sup>15</sup> Seal-rings continued their function as identity cards until early twentieth century when printing became popular, and paper documents began to play significant roles. Unlike European seals that are primarily pictorial, inscriptions continue to play central part in the seals of the Islamic world.

Seal impressions on manuscripts and legal documents were equally important; they were visually distinct elements that either identified the authorising authorities, or confirming the ownership of books and manuscript – a trend that is still practised. On their small bodies, seals carry valuable information that has helped in tracing their ownerships. Seals had such an important role in social and legal arena that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many foreigners who held official positions in Iran and other countries where Persian was the official language, used seals engraved with Persian lettering.<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 7). In India, Persian was the language of culture and literature, and the official court language for some seven hundred years. Officers of the East-India Company who theoretically acted as ‘servants’ of the Mughal Emperors, used Persian seals, a

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<sup>14</sup> The Persians’ contribution to the development of cursive Arabic script, from its early developments, has been remarkable. The six styles of cursive writing – known as *al-Aqlām al-Sitta* in Arabic, and *Shish Qalam* in Persian – were standardised and introduced by Ibn Muqlah (d. 940CE), the Persian master calligrapher and a high-ranking *vizier* to three Abbasid caliphs. He formulated calligraphic rules for the six classical style of Arabic calligraphy, namely Naskh, Thulth, Muhaqqaq, Rayhān, Tawqī‘, and Riqā‘.

<sup>15</sup> Edward William Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians: Written in Egypt during the Years 1833-1834?* (Paisley and London: Alexander Gardner, 2010), 48. (Digitised by the Internet Archive in 2010 with funding from Lyrasis Members and Sloan Foundation), Retrieved Jan, 6, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Persian was the literary and official language of a large region in Asia and Europe. By the fifteenth century, it stretched from China to the Balkans, and from Siberia to the Indian subcontinent. See Nile Green, *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca* (University of California Press, 2019), 1.

practice which continued until the era of the colonial India into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 8). Furthermore, some Iranian merchants, who had foreign trades used bilingual seals.<sup>18</sup>



*Fig. 7: Persian seal of Alexander Honey (Reversed image of the physical seal) The inscription is in excellent Nastaliq style and reads:*  
 امين الملك اشرف الدوله الكزاندر هانى بهادر  
 ارسلان جناب  
**Translation:**  
*Trusty of the kingdom, the eminent Alexander Honey Bahadur Arsalan Jang, (dated) 1185 H. (1771CE)*  
 (After M. J. Jeddi (2012), p. 282)



*Fig. 8: Persian seal of Edward Charles Ross from a letter dated June 1, 1887 The inscription is in excellent Nastaliq style and reads :*  
 ادورد چارلس راس باليوز دولت بهيه انگليس در  
 خليج فارس  
**Translation:**  
*Edward Charles Ross, Representative of British Government in the Persian Gulf*  
 (British Library)

Making seal-rings is still practised and appreciated as a form of artistic expression reflecting the tastes, or religious beliefs and affiliations of their owners. Seals with devotional phrases have had a long history. Some seal owners used certain religious expressions to be engraved on their seals; such seals with their unique compositions and designs were identified as the persons' personal seals, and gave

<sup>17</sup> See Annabelle Teh Gallop & Venetia Porter, *Seals of the Islamic World* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2012), 66-67.

<sup>18</sup> See the chapter on "Seals" in Amir H. Zekrgoo, *The Sacred Art of Marriage: Persian Marriage Certificates of the Qajar Dynasty* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2000), 25-29.

validity to the documents that carried them. The practice continued and evolved to fulfil the aesthetic sense of contemporary elite. Production of exquisite seal-rings with devotional phrases executed in excellent calligraphy, has gradually developed into a trend in the Iranian art and crafts arena. And within that trend, devotional expressions – to Allah, the Prophet, the *imāms* and saints – occupy a distinct place.

### Collection of Seals in Nami's Manuscript

In 2020, I published a paper introducing a rare and somewhat unique Persian manuscript by Nami Isfahani – an illustrious, but less-known, nineteenth-century Iranian poet and historian from the Zand dynasty (r. 1751-1779),<sup>19</sup> from ISTAC's SMNA Library.<sup>20</sup> The manuscript contains two of Nami's unpublished *divans* – namely *Leylī va Majnūn* and *Khosrow va Shīrīn* – bound together in a single leather binding. Nami was undoubtedly under the influence of Nizami (1141-1209), who lived some six centuries before him; and this, understandably, had caused confusion from the side of the cataloger, who attributed the two *divans* to Nizami, and recorded it as such in a catalog that was compiled in 1994.<sup>21</sup>

The manuscript's appearance – casual handwriting, untidy treatment of visual elements – in addition to other technical flaws are both exciting and misleading!

*The volume is incomplete from both ends; ...and whatever remains also is not in right arrangement. And ... terrible handwriting all-through! One may therefore conclude that the volume is of no significance. Yet, a careful assessment of the text, illustrations, seal*

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<sup>19</sup> His full name has been recorded as Mirza Mohammad Sadiq Mosavi Isfahani, a secretary and historian in the court of the Iranian monarch and the founder of Zand dynasty, Karim Khan (r. 1751-1779). See Mohsen Zaker Alhosseini (Muhsin Dakir al-Hussaini), "Wāmaq va 'azrā-e Nāmī Isfahānī" in *Nameh Farhangestan Quarterly*, 23 (Summer 1383 HSh/ (2004): 136.

<sup>20</sup> Amir H. Zekrgoo, "Who is the bearded man and the young boy standing next to him? Fresh findings from an illustrated manuscript of Nāmī's Leylā va Majnūn & Khosrow va Shīrīn," *Al-Shajarah* 25, no. 2, 2020: 335-359.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 337.

*impressions, marginal writings, and doodling sketches,  
will bring the manuscript to a new light of literal,  
historical, social, and artistic significance.*<sup>22</sup>

A somewhat comprehensive account of the socio-historical and artistic significance of the manuscript has been provided in my paper just cited. There, I have explained that the manuscript was never commissioned, nor did the scribe-cum-illustrator compiled it to quench his own literary and artistic thirst. The manuscript was prepared as a gift from Mahdi,<sup>23</sup> a passionate man of high intellectual capacity and artistic creativity, for his beloved nephew, Lutf-Ali. “Uncle Mahdi – whoever he was – must be commended for his compassion, courage, artistic skills, and unharnessed creativity; since such level of freedom and spontaneity in reproducing a manuscript such as this one, is indeed rare!”<sup>24</sup>

The forty-three-seal impressions on the pages of this manuscript came from seven seals. For the sake of easy referencing, I have assigned letters A to G to each of the seven categories. The seals come in four main shapes: vertical-oval, horizontal-oval, square, and drop-shape. The inscriptions on all seals is Nasta’liq, a Persian style founded by the famous Iranian master Mir Ali Tabrizi (d. 1420).<sup>25</sup> Unlike what we usually expect from the seals in manuscripts, none of the seals of this volume have reference to the owner. And this goes in perfect harmony with the idea behind the creation of this manuscript: a genuine expression of compassion of a loving uncle for his beloved nephew! One thing that all seals have engraved on them is the name Ali – the son-in-law of the Prophet, the fourth Caliph, and the first Shia *Imam*. The Arabic name Ali (meaning ‘high’ or ‘exalted’) is also one of the 99 names of Allah,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 335.

<sup>23</sup> His full name is recorded as ‘Mahdī, son of Āqā Hādī Işfahānī’ on the colophon (folio 26-L) of *Leylī va Majnūn*.

<sup>24</sup> Zekrgoo, “Who is the bearded man...?”, 336.

<sup>25</sup> See P. P. Soucek, “‘Alī Tabrizī,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 1, 881; S. Brent Plate, *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-cultural Reader* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 93.

better known as *al-Asmā al-Husnā*. The seals are undoubtedly of devotional nature, and in this sense the manuscript and its rare collection of seals stand on a socially and culturally distinct ground.

The seal impressions on the pages of this manuscript are often faded or imperfect. Reading the inscriptions was therefore not always easy, and the same goes for seeing and appreciating the decorations carved on them. To overcome this problem, I have included two images for each category; an image of the seal as it appears in the manuscript page, and a line-drawing I sketched to provide a clearer/sharper visual presentation of the details. An analytical elaboration of form and content is provided below images.

**Category A:**

Dimension: 1.5 x 2.2 mm. Repeated four times on folios 2-L, 5-L, 8-L, and 15-L. (Fig. 9)



*Fig. 9: This horizontally oval shaped seal was designed tastefully and skillfully. Negative and positive spaces work perfectly, playing game with the eyes of the spectator. Two stylised birds symmetrically appear on the two sides of the central axis. Heads of birds are turned towards a nice floral motif at the center of the seal. The negative space (white area) between the pair of birds and the motif in the center, has formed a symmetrical plant-shape itself. Inscription on the body of the bird on the right reads Adriknī (behold me), while the bird on the left carries Ya 'Alī (O' Ali) on its body. Inscriptions are in Nasta'liq script.*



**Category B:**

2.3 x 1.6 mm in dimension, this seal has been repeated 3 times on folios 10-L, 21-L, and 62-L. (Fig. 10)



*Fig. 10: This tastefully designed vertically oval-shaped seal has multiple textual and visual elements with religious and symbolic significances.*

*In the center of the seal stands a cypress tree that carries, in Nasta'liq style, Adriknī Ya 'Alī – a phrase shared by the rest of the seals – except for Category E. The letter  $\text{س}$  in the word Alī follows the common round form, while in the case of Adriknī it is penned with a stylized horizontally elongated stroke. Cypress tree is a frequently used symbol in Persian literature and art. Its upright stance and evergreen quality stands for honesty, steadfastness, and reliability. Associating these qualities with the personality of Imām Ali was perhaps an intentional decision by the artist.*

*On the two sides of the tree, towards the top, a pair of offshoots are observed. The outline of the tree with its protruding branches gives us the shape of a stylised tulip – yet another symbol in Persian art and poetry. Tulip symbolises love, and it has been used extensively as a religious symbol for martyrdom in the path of God.*

*The body of the cypress tree in this seal, also resembles the drop-shape of Category C seals.*

**Category C:**

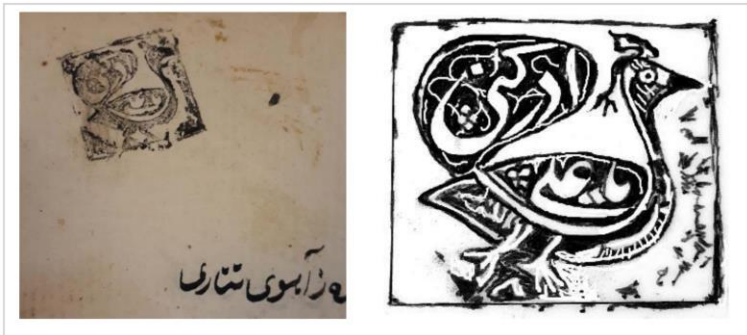
1.8 x 1.2 mm in dimension, this seal has been repeated 5 times on folios 16-L, 19-L, 49-L, 53-L, and 89-L. (Fig. 11)



*Fig. 11: This drop-shaped seal also has almost the same compositional arrangement as the central element (cypress tree) in Category B seals. But the arrangement of the words in this one is reverse; Ya 'Alī is composed on the bottom and Adriknī on the top. The letter س in both words are penned with a horizontally elongated stroke.*

**Category D:**

1.5 x 1.6 mm in dimension, this seal has been repeated 11 times on folios: 14-L, 48-L, 70-L, 83-L, 88-L, 91-L, 114-L, 120-L, 122-L, 138-L, and 148-D. (Fig. 12)



*Fig. 12: This square shaped seal is different and vivid; as if it were designed spontaneously, with a childish sense of playfulness that overcomes the seriously serene message engraved on it. There is also a pleasant contrast between the somewhat rigid square frame, and the curvy dynamic form of the body and tail of the stylised peacock.*

The two sections of writing (*Ya 'Alī and Adriknī*) are placed on the body and tail of the bird respectively. The letter *س* in the word *Ali* on the top follows the typical round shape, while in the case of *Adriknī* it is penned with a horizontally elongated stroke.

**Category E:**

1.9 x 1.9 mm in dimension, this seal has been repeated 2 times on folios 17-L and 34-L. (Fig. 13)



Fig. 13: In this square-shaped seal two hemistiches of a Persian couplet have been composed in three lines; each line framed in an elongated escutcheon. It reads:

نشیند بمنبر ز بعد نبی  
شه «لو کشف» کان احسان، علی

*On the Prophet's pulpit, after his demise,*

*Sits 'Alī, the king of 'law kushifa'<sup>26</sup>, the mine of generosity.<sup>27</sup>*

<sup>26</sup> This phrase is a section of the following saying attributed to Imam Ali, emphasising on his deep and unchanging faith and conviction:

لَوْ كُشِفَ الْغَطَاءُ مَا أَرْتَدَّدْتُ بَيْتِي

"Even the removal of all veils (and exposure of all that are concealed) will not add to my certainty"

Quoted in Majlisi, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 40 (Tehran, 1403H/1983), 153.

<sup>27</sup> This couplet refers to a sermon that the Prophet Muhammad gave shortly before his demise in 632 CE. The event took place near the Pond of Khumm (Ghadīr Khumm) – situated between Mecca and Medina - and has since been known by that name. In this sermon, according to Shia sources, the Prophet announced Ali as his

**Category F:**

2 x 1.3 mm in dimension, this seal has been repeated 9 times on folios 24-L; 38-L; 54-L; 66-L; 74-L; 92-L; 126-L; 134-L; 146-L. (Fig. 14)



*Fig. 14: This horizontally oval shaped seal has similar wordings (ادرکنی یا علی) in bold Nasta'liq script. Few star-shaped decorations are placed in negative spaces.*

**Category G:**

1.7 x 20 mm in dimension, this seal has been repeated 9 times on folios 32-L; 72-L; 82-L; 100-L; 104-L; 118-L; 123-L; 139-L; 143-L. (Fig. 15)

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successor. See Razwy, Sayed Ali Asghar, *A Restatement of the History of Islam and Muslims* (Lulu Press Inc. 2014), 274-276.

Sunnis do not dispute the event that happened in Ghadīr Khumm, but interpret it in a different light. They regard the Prophet's statement as a general gesture of love and support for Ali. See Juan Eduardo Campo, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Infobase Publishing, 257-258.



*Fig. 15: In this square-shaped seal, multiple visual elements – calligraphy, floral motifs, animal and celestial forms – are composed in a powerful formal arrangement. The designer has used four basic rule lines (two vertical and two horizontal) to divide the surface of the seal into nine well-organised sections. The central motif is framed tastefully with four elongated rectangles on the four sides, and four small squares on the corners. Each of the small squares is decorated with a stylised flower, while the elongated rectangles carry inscriptions on them. The inscriptions and visual element at the center are of symbolic significance.*

*At the center of the seal stands a roaring lion. On the back of the lion appears a sun with rays shooting at all directions. Lion is a prominent national as well as religious symbol. The combination of 'lion and sun' (shīr va khorshīd) was used as a national symbol on Iranian flags for a long span of the country's history. It also appeared on coins, paper-money and official letter headings. On the other hand, the Arabic word *asad* (lion) is one of the epithets of Imām Ali. The term *Shīr-e Khodā* (شیر خدا) – which means 'the Lion of God' – has been used exclusively in Persian literature in reference to Imām Ali.*

*On the body of the lion appears the phrase *Adriknī Ya 'Alī* in Nasta'liq style. The four elongated rectangles on the four sides of the seal carry the following four hemistiches of a famous Arabic quatrain:*

نَادِ عَلِيًّا مَظْهَرَ الْعَجَائِبِ  
تَجِدُهُ عَوْنًا لَكَ فِي النَّوَائِبِ

كُلُّ هَمٍّ وَ غَمٍّ سَيُنْجَلِي  
بَوْلَايَتِكَ يَا عَلِيُّ يَا عَلِيُّ يَا عَلِيُّ<sup>28</sup>

*Call the Exalted one, who is the stage of marvels,  
He will help you in the times of difficulty  
Obstacles will clear, and will remain no worry  
With your guardianship, O 'Alī, O 'Alī, O 'Alī<sup>29</sup>*

## Appreciation

My sincere vote of thanks goes to Dr. Mohammad Javad Jeddi, a leading authority on Persian seals. He was kind enough to help me deciphering some unclear words in one of the seals introduced in this paper. Dr. Sadra Zekrgoo went through the final draft of the article and made valuable suggestions for which I am thankful.

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<sup>28</sup> Majlisi, *Bihār al-Anwār*, 1403H, vol. 20, 73.

<sup>29</sup> This poem is a short summary of the first part of a much larger devotional prayer that reads:

نَادِ عَلِيًّا مَظْهَرَ الْعَجَائِبِ. تَجِدُهُ عَوْنَا لَكَ فِي النَّوَائِبِ. لِي إِلَى اللَّهِ حَاجَتِي وَ عَلَيْهِ مُعَوْلِي كُلَّمَا رَمَيْتَهُ وَ رَمَيْتَ  
مُقْتَضَى كُلِّ هَمٍّ وَ غَمٍّ سَيُنْجَلِي بِعَظَمَتِكَ يَا اللَّهُ وَ بِنُبُوَّتِكَ يَا مُحَمَّدَ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَ آلِهِ وَ سَلَّمَ وَ بَوْلَايَتِكَ يَا عَلِيُّ يَا  
عَلِيُّ يَا عَلِيُّ. أَذْرِكُنِي بِحَقِّ لَطْفِكَ الْخَفِيِّ، اللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ اللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ اللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ أَنَا مِنْ شَرِّ أَعْدَائِكَ بَرِيءٌ بَرِيءٌ بَرِيءٌ

*Call the Exalted one, who is the stage of wonders, so that He may help you in the times of difficulties. This humble servant is in constant need of God's grace. I depend on Him in all my affairs, and invoke Him for the clarity of obstacles and clearance of concerns. I call upon You. I take refuge to Your greatness O Allah, and to your prophethood O Muhammad, and to your guardianship O 'Alī, O 'Alī, O 'Alī. O Allah, behold me with your concealed Grace, Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest, Allah is the Greatest. I take refuge to Thee from Your enemies.*



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